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IN
SOKOLNIKI**

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They didn't have far to go for their tree, because Sokolniki, on the outskirts of Moscow, was right near a forest. They picked the biggest, greenest tree they could find, chopped it down, and took it back to the children's home.

When the tree was brought in, the children saw two crossed boards nailed to the bottom of it, to make it stand firmly. Then Volodya the electrician brought in a big box of decorations the children themselves had made. There were paper bears, rabbits, and elephants, but best of all was a rosy-cheeked Grandfather Frost with a long white beard.

The next day they all got up early. They were waiting for Lenin to arrive. It was still light out, but the children kept asking the superintendent:

“What if Lenin doesn't come?”

“Will he come if there’s a blizzard again?”

The superintendent was an old Petrograd worker who had known Lenin for many years, and that’s why all the children wanted to know what he’d say.

“If he said he’d come, he’ll be sure to come,” he answered confidently.

It was time for the party, but there was a terrible blizzard outside. The wind whistled in the pines, and heavy snowflakes filled the air.

It was getting late, but Lenin hadn’t arrived yet.

Then they heard one of the grown-ups whisper:

“I don’t think he’ll come in such a snow-storm.”

The children ran to find the old superintendent again.

He said very sternly:

“Don’t worry! Remember what I told you: if he promised to be here, he’ll come.”

They all sat around, waiting. The wind was howling outside, flinging the dry snow against the windowpanes. No one heard a car drive up to the



front gate, because there were so many other noises and sounds coming from the outside. Lenin got out of the car.

He went upstairs, took off his hat and coat and wiped the wet snow from his face with a handkerchief. Then he went straight into the big room where all the children were gathered.

They recognised him right away, because they had seen his picture so many times. Still, they all felt shy at first. They stood around staring at Lenin and not saying a word.

Lenin didn't wait long. He looked at them slyly and asked:

"Who knows how to play cat-and-mouse?"

The first to answer was Vera, the eldest of the children:

"I do!"

"Me, too!" a little boy named Lyosha shouted.

"Well then, you'll be the cat," Lenin said.

The children formed a circle round the tree. Little Katya was the mouse. Lyosha ran after Katya and was just about to catch her, when she grabbed hold of Lenin and he swung her up high.



“The cat can’t catch you now!”

Then Senya was the mouse. Lyosha soon caught him, and they changed parts: Senya was now the cat and Lyosha the mouse.

They played so long they all got hot.

Suddenly the door opened and in thumped a big grey elephant. The children squealed and shouted. Many of them recognised the grey piano cover, but who was under it? The cover swayed along slowly, with a long trunk bobbing up and down in front. The two front feet had felt boots on and the two hind ones were wearing shoes. If you weren’t too particular it really did look like a live elephant. The great beast grunted as it clumped around the tree. Then it waved goodbye to all with its trunk and lumbered out. Once the door to the playroom closed behind the elephant, the electrician and the watchman climbed out from under the grey cover. They were always the ones to think up funny pranks. They folded the cover and went back into the playroom, where all the children were still laughing and trying to guess who the elephant was.

They had a lot of fun that evening.

Someone shouted:

“Let’s play blindman’s buff!”

Lenin was “it”. While he tied a kerchief over his eyes Volodya moved the tree into a corner, to give the children more room.

Lenin held out his arms and tiptoed around. The children scattered. Then they crept towards him and shouted:

“Look out, it’s hot!”

And when he was very close, they yelled:

“You’ll get burned!”

Some of the braver ones crouched right under his outstretched hand, and he passed by without even touching them. They all shouted:

“Cold! You’ll freeze!”

Lenin saw that all the children were quick and nimble and knew the game well, and that he’d be a long time trying to catch them with his eyes blindfolded. That’s why he pretended he was going to walk forward, but actually spun round and grabbed the one who was standing closest to him.

Everyone shouted:

“Guess who it is! Guess who it is!”

The little boy he’d caught was laughing and squirming. It was Senya.

Lenin felt the boy’s hair and ran his fingers over the boy’s forehead and cheeks.

“It’s Senya!”

Senya was sorry he’d been caught, but he was glad Lenin had remembered him.

Then Katya recited a poem, but forgot the end of it and started to cry. Lenin tried to comfort her. She stopped crying, wiped her eyes, and said:

“Don’t go away, Lenin! Stay here with us for good.”

Lenin laughed and said:

“You know, I live right near here anyway.”

Volodya moved the tree back into the middle of the room and everyone started skipping round it, while the music teacher played the piano. Little Katya was holding on to Lenin’s big warm hand as she skipped.



Just then Lenin's sister and his wife brought in a big basket with presents.

Lyosha got a horn, Senya received a drum, Vera was given a book, and Katya a doll. There was a present for everyone.

While the children were tooting and drumming, shouting and racing around the tree with their new toys, Lenin sneaked out of the room quietly and drove away.

It all happened at a New Year's party in Sokolniki, on the outskirts of Moscow, in 1919.

А. КОНОНОВ

Елка в Сокольниках

на английском языке